

# Whole staff approaches to extended writing classes at Key Stage 3 - a case study in *using and doing* research

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## > Aims

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To use evidence from a long-standing whole school initiative on reading coaching and the wider body of research into reading coaching, to design and assess intensive cross-curricular interventions that would generate measurable gains in extended writing skills at Key Stage 3, that could be sustained into GCSE.

## > Dimensions of this Case Study

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The project focused on eight teachers, drawn from the English, Drama, Geography and Music departments, and five girls and sixteen boys from Year 9. The pupils were identified by their teachers as not expected to attain the target level in the Key Stage 3 National Tests. The project was embedded in larger scale literacy research and development undertaken by the school.

## > Summary of Findings for this Case Study

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- Most of the project pupils made rapid progress during the six-week intervention period.
- Seventeen of the pupils exceeded expectations by achieving Level 3 or above in their end of Key Stage 3 National Tests. Ten pupils attained Level 4 and one, Level 5. Of the remaining four pupils, one had a statement for moderate learning difficulties and two were poor attenders.
- A control group of pupils who did not take part in the intervention made no progress during the intervention period.
- The progress achieved as a result of the intervention was maintained when the pupils were reassessed using GCSE papers one year later. Although only a rough comparison can be made between Key Stage Tests and GCSE, the average improvement of pupils who had taken part in the intervention was estimated as 1.5 of a GCSE grade, compared with 0.7 of a grade in the control group.
- The experience of raising pupil attainment in basic literacy gave the non-specialist teachers a clearer understanding of the issues in a cross-curricular literacy policy.

## Summary of development points arising from using previous research

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- The approaches adopted in this writing project were developed as a result of prior research in the school on the effectiveness of using non-English teachers to coach reading.
- In both cases, we started by training small groups of especially competent and sympathetic subject staff, and then involved a wider circle of staff.
- At the end of the project, 84% of the teachers had been involved in reading coaching and 47% in extended writing coaching.
- The reading-coaching group was given INSET in the teaching of phonics, reading accuracy and comprehension (see Sewell: 1996).
- In the course of the project the whole staff had 14 hours of INSET on:
  - helping pupils to develop their ideas for extended writing through speaking and listening;
  - the use of writing plans, spider diagrams and writing frames;
  - redrafting; and
  - using ICT to check spelling, sentence punctuation and paragraphing.
- The writing coaching group had additional INSET on:
  - how to split an extended narrative into chapters;
  - how to teach grammar; and
  - how to use ICT for redrafting.
- The model was adapted and used in a Summer School, where Year 6/7 transition pupils achieved higher than average gains compared to pupils who attended other Summer Schools and those who attended none.
- The teaching model was also used with groups of more able pupils, focusing on the creation of extended non-fictional pieces.

## The School

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The school is a small co-educational comprehensive in the northeast of England, with 575 pupils and 38 teachers. It serves a mono-cultural area of public housing, and has many of the characteristics of schools in challenging circumstances. The area has high levels of child poverty and social deprivation. The school is one of 11 in England, where more than 10% of the pupils have statements of special educational needs. Disproportionately high numbers of mainstream pupils enter the school with literacy difficulties. At the time of this study:

- the average intake reading quotient was well below the national average at 87.6;
- 10% of the intake had reading ages at least 4 years behind their chronological age; and
- 33% were at least 2 years behind.

However, the AABC PANDA scores in the annual, OFSTED sponsored, performance audits indicated that at the time of this study, Bishopsgarth scored higher than the average (C scores) for schools with similar levels of deprivation. The earlier 1998 OFSTED inspection reported a school with "many strengths", in which "poor literacy continues to hinder progress in many subjects". Poor reading at intake affected all aspects of literacy, including speaking and listening - but most especially writing. It accepted the significance of whole staff involvement in reading coaching, judging that progress in reading was "startling". Its conclusion, however, was that the school should make the development of a "carefully structured and comprehensive literacy policy with particular attention to writing" a key issue for action.



## The Wider Issues

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Whole school literacy policies are more controversial than OFSTED suggested, however. They were first championed in the 1975 Bullock Report. Robertson (1980) argued that they manifestly failed because Bullock did not understand how difficult it would be to bring non-English subject staff on board. Bearne (1999) agreed that they failed to have any long-term impact, as they did not become embedded in the culture of the schools.

It is arguable that Bullock's greatest contribution was to publicise research on the poor long-term progress made by pupils given intensive remedial help. Similar issues are now emerging among the pupils transferring between Primary and Secondary schools. Some of the low attaining pupils given booster classes before the Key Stage 2 National Tests are making remarkable short term progress. However, between May and September, their reading ages fall, and progress in extended writing evaporated. This was confirmed in a major review of the "dip" phenomenon by NFER (1999).

Bullock found no solutions to this problem. My original research (1982) suggested that if the whole staff were given INSET in literacy *and* rolling groups of "especially competent and sympathetic subject staff" were brought together for training in reading coaching, then rapid short term gains could be translated into long-term progress. The *practical* experience of literacy coaching created greater acceptance of literacy issues among non-English subject staff. This ensured that reading scores went on rising even after the special help ended. Bishopsgarth decided to extend this model from reading to extended writing and investigate its long-term effects.

## The Intensive Interventions

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The main aim of the writing intervention was to give the 21 Year 9 pupils with Teacher Assessments at the Level 2/3 borderline, the skills and confidence to write at length. The pupils were withdrawn from a range of subjects, and received seven lessons per week in English / Literacy in the run-up to the KS3 National Tests. The school Literacy Committee decided that the

best way to sustain the group's interest over half a term would be to write a single extended story on an archetypal theme. We chose The Magic Carpet.

The INSET for the writing project team included a session on how to help pupils create writing plans, and how to split the extended narrative into six chapters:

1. Finding the carpet
2. Learning to fly
3. Visiting a chosen destination
4. Disaster strikes
5. A desperate letter
6. Coming home.

Few pupils at the school had computers and their inputting was extremely slow. The writing coaches decided that the first lesson each week should be used to help the pupils discuss, plan and compose the first drafts of each chapter in long hand. This would have the additional benefit of increasing the pupils' handwriting speed in the National Tests.

Many of the pupils in this group were reluctant to check or redraft their own work. Their first drafts were passed to the ICT technicians to type - mistakes and all. Seeing their work translated into print improved pupils' motivation. So the second lesson each week was for developing ideas, and correcting spelling, paragraphing and grammar at the computer. ICT was given a central role - not in composing but in redrafting each chapter.

Because technical accuracy plays such an important part in the Key Stage tests, the third lesson of the week was given over to the direct teaching of sentence punctuation and paragraphing. The staff INSET included guidance about the teaching of grammar. Staff followed a programme of grammar book-based lessons, but they were also encouraged to go back to the pupils' original drafts and incorporate contextualised examples.

## The Research Methods

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For the purposes of this particular research project, teachers assessed the pupils' short-term progress in writing using the results of May 1999 Key Stage 3 English tests. Their long-term progress



was assessed a year later, using the 1999 English GCSE papers, in Year 10 internal examinations. Whilst acknowledging that the criteria of these tests are distinct and comparisons unreliable, we felt that this would enable us to gauge progress in broad terms.

The exact nature of the project was shared with the Head and Governors, but kept secret from both teachers and the Year 10 pupils.

A control group was set up. This was composed of five pupils who were assessed in Year 9 as marginally above the Level 2/3 borderline, but who had had no extra support. They received the "normal" ration of four lessons per week in English in the run-up to the KS3 tests.

A questionnaire was given to the staff to determine their:

- grasp of literacy skills, such as phonics and grammar;
- prior training in literacy;
- involvement in school-based literacy INSET;
- experience of reading and writing coaching at the school; and
- the development of their understanding of whole school literacy issues.

## Results

### Pupil performance in KS3 and Y10 Tests

Figure 1 shows that of the Year 9 pupils who appeared likely to score less than a Level 3 in Key Stage 3 National Tests, 81% reached that target after six weeks, intensive, small group withdrawal work in extended writing. At the time of writing 15 out of the 19 pupils still at the school were on target for a GCSE pass. This confirmed our hypothesis that non-English secondary subject teachers had a key role to play in raising pupil attainments in coaching pupils in both reading and extended writing.

Figure 1.

Pupil	KS3	Year 10
Martin (statement)	N	U
Gary	4	E-
Gareth	3	F
James	4	G
Adam	4	F+
Richard	N	U
Liam	5	F+
Mark	4	Left
Gary	3	Absent
Peter	4	F
Matthew	N	G+
John	N	G
Jamie	3	F
Kelly	3	F
Donna	4	F
Adele	3	Left
Helen (statement)	3	F
David	4	G
Sean (statement)	4	E-
John	4	F-
Abigail	4	E+

### Questionnaire

The staff questionnaire established how few of the subject teachers in this case study school had ever been shown how to teach phonics, spelling, reading comprehension, sentence punctuation, handwriting or essay writing in Initial Teacher Training or subsequently. Even after they had had INSET, 57% felt that without extra practical guidance, they would be inadequately prepared to teach extended writing through the medium of their own subject. However, 90% thought it essential for teachers to be taught how to teach their pupils to read, and 78% thought it was either essential or very important for them to be shown how to teach the skills of extended writing.



These results confirm research by Lewis and Wray (2000), who found that whilst the majority of secondary staff accepted their role in supporting literacy development, few had the confidence or training to do so. The staff who had become involved in our reading and extended writing coaching scheme made no claims to expertise, but they enjoyed the experience and found that working in this way was satisfying.

In addition, the experience in this school showed that when teachers were given successful, practical experience of teaching extended writing skills in a safe, supported situation, this heightened their understanding of cross curricular literacy issues, and generated greater ownership for a whole school policy.

## Developing the Approach

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Having obtained successful results from the writing coaching scheme with the Year 9 pupils, we extended the approach to include:

- 20 less able pupils in Years 7 and 8;
- 29 more able pupils in Year 8; and
- the Year 6 literacy Summer School.

The approach adopted in the literacy Summer School illustrates how the writing coaching was used to bridge the gap between Year 6 and Year 7.

### The Literacy Summer School

The small group writing interventions were used during a literacy Summer School for Year 6 transfer pupils based at their new comprehensive school. Each session began with a model Literacy Hour. The pupils also spent one hour a day writing an extended piece of autobiographical writing in chapters. The first drafts were hand-written and then put onto computer as before. The original drafts were marked jointly by Primary and Secondary teaching colleagues. This moderation enabled the Primary teachers, who knew the prior attainment of these pupils, to set sufficiently challenging targets with their Secondary colleagues, for the summer school and the first term in Year 7.

Progress of these pupils was assessed by the NFER as part of a government review. They reported higher than average gains when these pupils were re-assessed at the end of the summer school, compared to pupils from other summer schools and those attending none. These gains were attributed to the pupils' participation in the writing-coaching scheme.

## 'The Dip'

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It was also clear that a proportion of pupils - and in this study this group was entirely made up of boys - reached a plateau or regressed between their Key Stage 3 tests and their Year 10 mock GCSEs. At the time of writing these boys were now back on track for a GCSE pass.

The results of this small research project, echo the findings of the NFER research (1999) and would suggest that when schools evaluate their literacy policies they should be aware of the possibility of a "dip" in pupils' reading and writing skills following intensive interventions. Long term mastery of literacy skills could become an increasingly important issue, as the pressure from 'League Tables' makes schools concentrate on short term gains in the run up to Key Stage and GCSE examinations.

## Wider Policy Implications

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1. The literacy co-ordinator should draw on the expressed willingness of most secondary teachers to learn more about supporting literacy, to ensure that they are given access to practical training in the teaching of reading and extended writing.
2. General discussions of whole school literacy policies manifestly fail to effect pupils' reading and writing skills. Experience in this school has shown that INSET works well if it is followed by giving teachers practical experience of small group withdrawal work, acting as reading or writing coaches in a safe, supported situation.
3. The short-term intensive coaching of pupils in extended writing in the weeks leading up to Key Stage 3 National Tests can have a positive effect on pupil attainment in those tests that can persist into Year 10.

4. Target setting and monitoring of the effects of the intensive interventions, in both the short and the long term, were incorporated into our whole school policy. This was to avoid one of the causes of failure of earlier whole-school policies (Robertson, 1980).
5. More time and funding should be set aside for teachers to use existing research findings and carry out their own classroom based research on some of the questions raised by the prevailing orthodoxies, through access to:
- University Education department libraries;
  - Partnership arrangements with University Education Departments;
  - Governmental institutions like the Teacher Training Agency;
  - the Internet; and
  - small, school-based research projects, which are grounded in the wider corpus of educational research.

## Further Reading

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**Bearne, E.:** *Use of Language in the Secondary Curriculum:* Routledge: 1999

**Counsell, C.:** *Analytical and discursive Writing at Key Stage 3:* The Historical Association: 1997

**EXEL:** *Writing Frames:* Exeter University: 1995

**Lankshear, C.:** *Changing Literacies:* Open University Press: 1997

**Lewis, M. and Wray, D.:** *Literacy in the Secondary School:* Falmer: 2000

**Poulson, L.:** *The English Curriculum in Schools:* Cassell: 1998

**Robertson, I.:** *Language Across the Curriculum: Four Case Studies:* Methuen:1980.

**Sewell, G.:** *Reshaping Remedial Education:* Croom Helm: 1982

**Sewell, G.:** *Special Needs Provision:* Cassell: 1996

**Wray, D. and Lewis, M.:** *Extending Literacy: Children Reading and Writing Non-fiction:* Hutchinson: 1997

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